The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about winter past-times

喝 (radical 口 kou3, mouth) means shout (he4) or drink: 喝水 (he1 shui3 = drink-water), 喝湯 (he1 tang1 = drink-soup). 喝茶 (he1 cha2 = drink-tea) means drink tea or take tea and snacks/dim-sum. Playboys 吃喝玩樂 (chi1 he1 wan2 le4 = eat-drink-play-enjoy-themselves).

In winter, people in cold countries 喝酒 (he1 jiu3 = drink-wine/liquor), 喝威士忌 (he1 wei1 shi4 ji4 = drink-“whi-s-ky”-transliterated), 喝高粱 (he1 gao1 liang2 = drink-Kao-liang, i.e. sorghum wine), 喝伏特加 (he1 fu2 te4 jia1 = drink-“vo-d-ka”-transliterated), 大喝特喝 (da4 he1 te4 he1 = big-drink-special/emphatic-drink = down huge quantities).

If you 喝多了 (he1 duo1 le0 = drink-much-ed = have drunk too much), you’ll 喝醉 (he1 zui4 = drink-drunken = get drunk).

by Diana Yue